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Leszek Drong

Theory's Other: Reintegrating the New Pragmatism into Literary Studies

The reasons for cherishing a particular academic text of one's own making are usually connected with its value and role as a crowning achievement of one's intellectual efforts. In my case, however, the essay reprinted below was more of a new begining than a terminus of an arduous journey. Above all else, it marked a momentous shift in my perspective on my professional commitments and priorities. Thereby, it carried significant personal and emotional overtones as well. Today I see it as a blueprint for what turned out to be an absorbing research interest which has continued to inspire and sustain me in my academic peregrinations ever since. Written in 2002, "Theory's Other" was the first attempt to define my position on the New Pragmatism in literary studies. As such, it laid the foundations for what was to become a booklength project completed in collaboration with several prominent American scholars including Stanley Fish, Walter Benn Michaels and Gerald Graff. Subsequently, selected sections of this essay were incorporated into my 2007 book titled *Disciplining the New Pragmatism: Theory, Rhetoric, and the Ends of Literary Study.*

In the early 1980's a juicy scandal erupted in connection with a controversial liaison between critical practice and literary theory. Their tempestuous relationship became an object of critical scrutiny on the part of Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp, whose essay "Against Theory" is a testimony to their unprecedented mistrust of any kind of meta-practice. In what follows I propose to interrogate both parties, i.e. those who defend the claims of theory and those who want to do away with it altogether. The latter group is often associated with the New Pragmatism whose origins and precepts I will discuss further on in this essay. Eventually, a *pragmatist critical perspective* will be brought to bear on both positions to demonstrate their respective advantages and disadvantages.

If theory may be charged with metapractical pretensions, a position which lays claim to a critical distance on theory itself may be suspected of metatheoretical ones. Therefore it must be stressed that my remarks on theory and its discontents will be made from within the enterprise and will never aspire to a metatheoreti-

cal status. One of the basic themes of any version of pragmatism is its insistence on the inescapable situatedness of our opinions. Mine will also come from a particular position, circumscribed by a set of beliefs and preconceptions that none of us can possibly transcend altogether. Rather than erect binary oppositions between theory and its New Pragmatist critique, I will seek to reintegrate the latter into the former and redescribe the New Pragmatism as theory's interiorised other.

The tendency to reconcile apparent antagonisms is what seems to have inspired Knapp and Michaels in the first place. Their vociferous pronouncements against theory rest on the contention that theory flourishes by positing divisions and separations where there are none. Their essay is a tour de force not because it provides a key to all the hitherto unsolved theoretical problems but because it reduces them all to a couple of rudimentary propositions concerning the issues of belief and intention. More than that, "Against Theory" ensures its own effectiveness as a critique of theory by assigning an unequivocal definition to this highly ambivalent concept, whose identification is Knapp and Michaels's preliminary, and strategically inestimable, step to its subsequent demolition. That in the long run their blows strike empty air is another corollary of their own argument: Knapp and Michaels first declare war against theory only to acknowledge that theory as they define it (for the purpose of their own critique) does not and cannot exist. If indeed, as they insist, "no one can reach a position outside practice,"[1] why go to such lengths to nip in the bud the aspirations of theorists who want to institute a metapractical agenda?

Let us retrace their argument step by step. What Knapp and Michaels are up to is aptly conveyed by the title of their essay. At its outset they qualify their attack by narrowing down the definition of theory to "a special project in literary criticism: the attempt to govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general."[2] Thus they leave aside vast areas of literary studies such as narratology, stylistics, and prosody, which they deem "essentially empirical"[3] rather than theoretical. Having staked out the territory that their opponent is authorised to occupy, they launch a full-scale offensive. Again, they claim the right to choose the weapon: they take up two exemplary concerns — intention and belief — to demonstrate their utterly unproblematical status and accordingly pull the carpet from under the feet of those who might still be inclined to spin theoretical yarns about those two notions. In short, their examples "are meant to represent the central mechanism of all theoretical arguments, and [their] treatment of them is meant to indicate that all such arguments

[1] Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels: "Against Theory," in: William J. Thomas Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 30.

[2] Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," 11.

[3] Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," 11.

will fail and fail in the same way."[4] Knapp and Michaels's argument, in turn, will prevail solely by virtue of its unassailable reductionism and plain commonsensicality.[5]

Of the two substantial arguments against theory that Knapp and Michaels put forward, the one which identifies text's meaning with author's intention deserves particular consideration. In the second section of their essay, Knapp and Michaels take E.D. Hirsch, Jr. — an exemplary intentionalist in their view — to task for implicitly positing a moment of interpretation before intention is present.[6] But in fact their own conclusions beg their question, inasmuch as what they assume to be evidence of the impossibility of meaning without intention boils down to an illustration of "how difficult it is to imagine a case of intentionless meaning."[7] They use their demonstration very much like a weapon which has already been tested in battle and proved efficacious in slaying the dragon of theory whereas the point is still a contestable one, as Jonathan Crewe points out in his response to Knapp and Michaels's essay.[8]

This is particularly conspicuous in their assault on Hirsch's distinction between 'the author's meaning' and 'the reader's meaning.' Whilst many literary critics would certainly subscribe to the claim about meaning and intention being inseparable, few will be naive enough to attach any *practical* significance to the intended meaning that the *empirical* author infused into her/his text. Hirsch stresses that we must carefully distinguish between "what the author intended" and "what the author intends,"[9] a distinction which involves two different intentional agents. And though I believe that Knapp and Michaels are right to argue that we cannot construe meaning without assigning intention, I cannot understand why they turn a blind eye to the *uselessness* of identifying meaning with *what the actual composer of the text might have intended*. In their attempt to outrun theory they reach a dead end rather than a practical resolution of the problem: their insistence that "the object of all reading is always the historical author's intention"[10] is not only indicative of their utopian nostalgy for the good old days before theory but it fails to provide a workable strategy for the critic as well. Are we to divine the meaning of a text inspired by some higher spiritual afflatus, in an act of mental communion with the long departed author? Or shall we fall back on guesswork and bare speculation? Surely, sober pragmatists that they aspire to be would not

[4] Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," 12.

[5] For an inciting discussion of the traps and temptations that inhere in being common-sensical see Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 74—75.

[6] See Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," 13—15.

[7] Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," 15.

[8] See Jonathan Crewe, "Toward Uncritical Practice," in: Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory*, 62.

[9] See E.D. Hirsch, Jr., "Against Theory?" in: Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory*, 50.

[10] Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Reply to Our Critics," in: Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory*, 103.

recommend that we distill the composer's intention from the intrinsic qualities of the text?[11]

Clearly, given their position on authorial intention, Knapp and Michaels are left with two options. Either, in the absence of any verifiable information about the empirical author's intention, they must postulate meaningless texts and thus at one fell swoop render pointless not only theory but intepretive practice as well, or they must subscribe to a version of 'strong' intentionalism which is essentialist at bottom and cannot possibly be squared with their avowedly pragmatist convictions. 'Strong' intentionalism assumes that the author impregnates her/his work with her/his intention which is preserved in the form a *signus Dei* in the text itself. Accordingly, the reader must be able to decode a secret message which lies hidden at the heart of each work and constitutes its unique essence. Needless to say, this conception is anathema to every orthodox pragmatist because "[p]ragmatists are supposed to treat everything as a matter of a choice of context and nothing as a matter of intrinsic properties. They dissolve objects into functions, essences into momentary foci of attention, and knowing into success at reweaving a web of beliefs and desires into more supple and elegant folds."[12] All things considered, the essentialist implications of Knapp and Michaels's argument about intention — undesirable as they must be for their authors — testify to their confusion about the vantage point from which to attack theory. Those implications might also give evidence of the inevitable entrappment of each antitheoretical stance within the confines of the discourse of theory.

Moreover, Knapp and Michaels's *intentional reductionism* leads to confusion for purely logical reasons. The confusion results from an all-too-smooth transition from epistemology to ontology. When they argue that meaning and the historical author's intention are inseparable, they act upon their own contention that "the object of interpretation is always a historical intention."[13] And though it may be true that "[a]ny interpreter of any utterance or text, within the institution of professional literary criticism or not, is … attempting to understand the author's intention,"[14] their conclusion that "texts mean what their authors intend"[15] is not a conclusion at all. First of all, from the fact that we attempt to understand a text's meaning, it does not follow that we *can* do so, at least not in the sense that the text *is possessed* of the meaning. Secondly, when we try to understand a text's meaning, we indeed do so firmly convinced that we are divining the empirical author's intention but *in practice* our divining comes down to imagining into being an intentional agent,

[11] Curiously, Knapp and Michaels recognise "the empirical difficulty of deciding what [a text's] author intended" but they fail to draw practical conclusions from that difficulty. See Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Reply to Rorty," in: Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory*, 142.

[12] Richard Rorty, "Philosophy without Principles," in: Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory*, 135.

[13] Knapp and Michaels, "Reply to Our Critics," 104.

[14] Knapp and Michaels, "Reply to Our Critics," 105.

[15] Knapp and Michaels, "Reply to Our Critics," 105.

what Michel Foucault calls the author-function,[16] who/which is our interpretive construct rather than a historical individual. To grasp that, one does not even need a theoretical argument: what we do as readers is an emipirical fact which is borne out by our interpretive practice.

What is particularly striking about Knapp and Michaels's essay is not their dogged persistence in defying theory but the procedure they use to drive their message home. Their assault on theory constitutes a theoretical moment *per se*.[17] For one, they cannot help relying on the discourse they want to transcend: the framework of their essay and its rhetoric are borrowed from what they seek to discredit. Of theoretical significance are also the conclusions that Knapp and Michaels urge their readers to draw. If there are any practical consequences that might follow from their propositions, they will be largely relevant to theory itself and to all those working within the enterprise. It goes without saying that they will not be sympathetic to the New Pragmatists' appeal for ceasing all theoretical activity. Thus it is likely that Knapp and Michaels's will prove to be a vacuous gesture, with no practical effect on what they are out to annihilate. They seem to anticipate as much when they conclude their essay by diminishing their opponent in the following words: "theory is nothing else but the attempt to escape practice."[18] Wouldn't it be easier (and more consistent) then to demonstrate that by busying oneself with critical practice rather than theory?

Although it might appear otherwise, what I have discussed up to this point is not meant to undermine the critical standpoint that Knapp and Michaels choose for their anti-theoretical manifesto. On the contrary, I believe that their pragmatist approach is one of the most invigorating elements in current theoretical debates. It is just that I find the arrows of their arguments pointed in a wrong direction: they seem to have miscalculated the *purpose* of their attack on theory. From a pragmatist perspective their essay misses the target that it was supposed to hit though it has certainly produced important side-effects. One of those (possibly undesirable) side-effects involves the consolidation in the camp of all the conservative theorists who might have felt threatened by the rhetorical bravado with which Knapp and Michaels set about dismantling the pillars of theory. Another side-effect is connected with the opportunity to calibrate the pragmatists' gunsights afforded by their essay's shortcomings. Historically, "Against Theory" was no doubt a pioneering endeavour to bring a pragmatist mode of thinking to bear on literary studies.[19]

[16] See Michel Foucalt, "What Is an Author?" in: Seán Burke, ed., *Authorship: From Plato to the Post-modern* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 233—246.

[17] A similar point is made by Adena Rosmarin in her essay "Theory of <Against Theory>." See Rosmarin, "Theory of »Against Theory«," in: Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory*, 80—88.

[18] Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," 30.

[19] It must be acknowledged that it was not the only endeavour of that kind made in the early 1980's. In 1980 Stanley Fish published his *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* and in 1982 "What is the Meaning of a Text?," an influential essay by Jeffrey Stout, came out in *New Literary History*. But neither Fish nor Stout declare their own position to be so

In fact, this critical position is rooted in a philosophical tradition of over a century's standing. Whatever they say about theory and practice, Knapp and Michaels bank on the cornerstones of pragmatism erected by its progenitors — Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey and William James. Those cornerstones include, among others, anti-foundationalism, anti-essentialism, anti-representationalism and fallibilism.[20] A thorough discussion of their origins and development within pragmatism goes well outside the scope of this essay but I would like to give a brief characterisation of the pragmatist understanding of their implications in the context of truth, which has always been one of pragmatism's central concerns.[21]

Anti-foundationalism and fallibilism are clearly promulgated by Peirce in his attack on scholasticism in philosophy. Peirce is quite skeptical about the Cartesian project of establishing the ultimate test of certainty (which, according to Descartes, was to be found in the *cogito*, the individual consciousness) but he maintains that we cannot put into doubt everything at once: "We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy. These prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which it does not occur to us *can* be questioned."[22] Nevertheless, they are prejudices rather than certitudes in the absolute sense and that insight does credit to pragmatists, who, unlike the scholastically-minded philosophers, are capable of allowing for their own fallibility.

In "The Fixation of Belief," a momentous essay which Peirce delivered to the Metaphysical Club at Cambridge in 1877, he explores how we come to acquire beliefs which guide our desires and shape our actions. Of the four methods of fixing belief — the method of tenacity, the method of authority, the *a priori* method and the method of science — Peirce privileges the last one because only the method of science may ensure that man's opinions coincide with the facts. It is only by the method of science that we can get to know truth "which is distinguished from falsehood simply by this, that if acted on it will carry us to the point we aim at and not

overtly pragmatist. Besides, unlike Knapp and Michaels', their texts do not bear the qualities of a critical creed.

[20] In his essay "Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds," Richard J. Bernstein lists as constitutive themes of the pragmatic *ēthos* anti-foundationalism, fallibilism, pluralism, the social character of the self and the need to nurture a criticial community of inquirers as well as the awareness and sensitivity to radical contingency and chance that mark the universe, our inquiries and our lives. For the purpose of my argument, which is principally concerned with the conjunction of the New Pragmatism and Literary Studies, I have modified his list to bring out those themes which are particularly resonant in the context of contemporary critical theory and practice. See Richard J. Bernstein "Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds," in: Louis Menand, ed., *Pragmatism: A Reader* (Vintage Books: New York, 1997), 385—389.

[21] William James considers the concept of truth so important that he defines pragmatism itself as "a genetic theory of what is meant by truth." William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 26.

[22] Charles Sanders Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," in: Menand, ed., *Pragmatism*, 4—5.

astray."[23] Again, Peirce's point is not that the method of science should provide us with 'objective knowledge' of the world. Instead, he can envisage substantial practical advantages of holding beliefs acquired by that particular method. Clearly, the principal advantage is that such beliefs help us act effectively, that is, they are instrumental in our day-to-day dealing with our environment. This is not necessarily to say, however, that those beliefs are in any sense 'truer' to what this environment is in itself.

Equally critical of the scholastic methodology is John Dewey. In his "Theories of Knowledge" he takes scholasticism to task for propounding "a form of knowing which has no especial connection with *any* particular subject matter. It includes making distinctions, definitions, divisions, and classifications for the mere sake of making them — with no objective in experience."[24] Clearly, the scholastic method stands here for what Knapp and Michaels will identify as theory: it is a system of rules and principles that, by virtue of being abstracted from any specific context, are elevated to a higher epistemological status. Knowledge for Dewey, as well as for other pragmatists, can never be contextless. A problem is worth exploring if its solution makes a difference to how we see other problems or cope with other tasks, that is, if practical consequences follow from our exploration of it. As Peirce puts it, pragmatism, understood as "a certain maxim of logic," was invented "to trace out in the imagination the conceivable practical consequences, — that is, the consequences for deliberate, self-controlled conduct, — of the affirmation or denial of [a] concept."[25] Therefore, pragmatism does not shun abstractions and generalisations.[26] It is just that they must be subordinated to our specific goals and purposes rather than admired for their imperial insusceptibility to contextual applications.

This is exactly how William James approaches the concept of truth. In *Pragmatism*, his position on truth is at once anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist and anti-representationalist. To begin with, James declares that purely objective truth is nowhere to be found because truth is what we *make* rather than discover.[27] Thus truh is redefined as a dynamic property of an idea, as what *happens* to it in the process of its verification and validation.[28] That paves the way for 'the instrumental view of truth' which James, relying on Dewey and Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller, describes in the following words:

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[23] Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," in: Menand, ed., *Pragmatism*, 25.

[24] John Dewey, "Theories of Knowledge," in: Menand, ed., *Pragmatism*, 215.

[25] Charles Sanders Peirce, "A Definition of Pragmatism," in: Menand, ed., *Pragmatism*, 56.

[26] See the following passage: "She [i.e. pragmatism] has no objection whatever to the realizing of abstractions, so long as you get about among particulars with their aid and they actually carry you somewhere." James, *Pragmatism*, 29.

[27] See James, *Pragmatism*, 25, 78 and 84.

[28] See James, *Pragmatism*, 77—78.

> Ideas (which themselves are but parts of experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience, to summarize them and get about among them by conceptual short-cuts instead of following the interminable succession of particular phenomena. Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our eperience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labour; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true instrumentally.[29]

While essentialists tend to see truth as an immanent and immutable property of ideas, and representationalists stress the relation of correspondence between true ideas and whatever they stand for, James takes the true as merely "the expedient in our way of thinking."[30] His insistence on the utility of truth(s) is of course very much against the grain of rationalist and idealist views of what truth *ought* to be. But, at bottom, his position on the issue aptly illustrates pragmatism's ambition to settle all those metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable.[31]

For a sustained critique of foundationalism, representationalism and essentialism, let us turn now to two contemporary avatars of pragmatism, whose views, far from making up a system, will furnish the basic parameters of the New Pragmatist stance on the relationship between theory and critical practice. Richard Rorty's position on the issue is informed by his conviction that literary criticism has recently succumbed to "a desire to paint the great big picture."[32] This is due to a mistaken assumption that literary critics, in order to validate their endeavours, should seek help from philosophy.[33] In consequence, as Rorty has it, they "take philosophy a bit too seriously."[34] Instead of focusing on small-scale jobs, literary critics ransack philosophy for 'theories of meaning' or 'theories of the nature of interpretation.' Again, Rorty deplores the literary theorists' overabundant usage of the scientific rhetoric characteristic of the early period of analytic philosophy. Such a dalliance between

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[29] James, *Pragmatism*, 23 (italics supplied by James).

[30] James, *Pragmatism*, 86.

[31] In the same context, Peirce does not mince his words and announces that the application of pragmatism to logic "speedily sweeps all metaphysical rubbish out of one's own house. Each abstraction is either pronounced to be gibberish or is provided with a plain, practical definition." Peirce, "A Definition of Pragmatism," 58.

[32] Richard Rorty, "Texts and Lumps," in: Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 78.

[33] In *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Rorty argues for reversing the vector of influences: he stipulates that literary critics be 'moral advisors' for ironists (i.e. a species of philosophers who are contrasted with metaphysicians) and instruct them in exercising the skill of synthesising. See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, 80—81.

[34] Rorty, "Texts and Lumps," 78.

literary criticism and philosophy must be fruitless because philosophy too has failed to yield interesting results with regard to the relevant topics. Thus what Rorty finds particularly objectionable is an implicit way of instituting a hierarchy of the human sciences in which philosophy holds a privileged position vis-à-vis literary criticism.

This is not to say, however, that philosophy and literary studies have nothing in common. On the contrary, seen from a pragmatist perspective, both enterprises share a similar untheoretical, narrative style. According to Rorty, "telling stories about how one's favorite and least favorite literary texts hang together is not to be distinguished from — is simply a species of — the »philosophical« enterprise of telling stories about the nature of the universe which highlight all the things one likes best and least."[35] Therefore he recommends that, rather than try to see the great big picture, critics have their favourite philosophers — favourites chosen by consonance with their own projects and arranged into a canon of their own making. Rorty suggests that they "neither be afraid of subjectivity nor anxious for methodology, but simply proceed to praise [their] heroes and damn [their] villains by making invidious comparisons."[36] Thus critics needn't worry about demonstrating that their choices are underwritten by "antecedently plausible principles."[37] Though at first sight it looks like an invitation to interpretive anarchy,[38] Rorty's reassurance merely implies that critical practice does not have to presuppose any theoretical foundations.

And yet Rorty does not deliver his final blow and spares theory for pedagogic purposes. Of course theory will no longer be entitled to guide critical practice as its methodological foundation. Like Knapp and Michaels, Rorty stigmatises theory's aspirations to a metapractical status but he appreciates its generalisations and definitions for the purpose of summing up past achievements in the field of practice. On this view, *theory follows practice and constitutes its rhetoric*, a didactic instrument which may be useful in the lecture hall, rather than a set of dogmas to be fixed above the entrance to the academy. In this sense, Rorty does not lose sight of the practical consequences of theory's existence. He can envisage an academic niche where theory will be harnessed to a pedagogic mission, and the mission may prove to be its redeeming feature.

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[35] Rorty, "Texts and Lumps," 79.

[36] Rorty, "Texts and Lumps," 79.

[37] Rorty, "Texts and Lumps," 79.

[38] That interpretive anarchy is not a viable alternative to principled criticism is aptly demonstrated by Stanley Fish, who argues that, though local and contextual, some interpretive constraints are always in place precisely because of the impossibility of transcending one's situatedness and cultural assumptions. Accordingly, he claims that interpretation is itself "a *structure* of constraints, a structure which, because it is always and already in place, renders unavailable the independent or uninterpreted text and renders unimaginable the independent and freely interpreting reader." Stanley Fish, "Working on the Chain Gang," in: Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 98. See also Fish, "Consequences," in: Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 323.

Much less sympathetic to the project and prospects of Literary Studies is Stanley Fish, another literary critic who declares that, on his agenda, practice holds priority over theory. Fish's views are in a sense symptomatic of the evolution of the New Pragmatist position within Literary Studies.[39] His first critical contribution to produce some resonance in the field was meant to break with the tyranny of the New Criticism which still reigned in the American academy in the early 1970's. Fish's conception of affective stylistics, which was first and foremost an attack on uncompromising formalism of the New Critics, was largely appreciated for its championing of the reader and her/his role in generating the meaning of the text. It was already in "Literature in the Reader" that Fish signed for the anti-essentialist camp,[40] although his account of the reading process was still vulnerable to some trenchant criticisms which concerned his failure to define the conventions that readers follow when they read as well as his insistence on reading sentences word by word in a temporal sequence.

Soon, however, Fish offered a rectified account (indeed, a theoretical model) of how we come to produce readings which evince intriguing convergencies and surprising differences. His concept of 'interpretive communities' proved to be the coup de grace to the hopes of all those who still believed that he would convert to a foundationalist creed. In "Interpreting the *Variorum*," a text first published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1976, Fish recognises "the stability of interpretation among readers and the variety of interpretation in the career of a single reader."[41] Accordingly, he concedes the existence of something independent of and prior to individual interpretation. But his claim is that it is not to be sought in the intrinsic features of the text; rather, the stability and the variety are functions of interpretive strategies shared by those who make up interpretive communities. What is more, interpretive strategies, which allow us to differentiate between interpretive communities, do not come into force once we have read a book and are about to come up with an interpretation of it. They underlie the very production of texts. Within a community, authors and readers are bound by the same conventions, and that allows authors to produce what they might expect to be interpreted in the light of their intended strategies. Therefore it is particularly important to bear in mind that no interpretive strategies are imposed by the text because the text itself is a function of a set of strategies. We belong to interpretive communities even before we start reading or writing.

[39] To the best of my knowledge, Fish has never refered to his own critical position as New Pragmatist but his avowed anti-foundationalism is one of the defining features of any brand of pragmatism.

[40] See Stanley E. Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," in: Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 72, where he defines the meaning of a sentence in terms of an event involving the participation and contribution of the reader rather than the sentence's immanent qualities alone.

[41] Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the *Variorum*," in: David Lodge, ed., *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (New York: Longman, 1988), 325.

This is not to say that our choice of the strategies must be made once and for good. Unlike fixed and immutable principles, interpretive strategies are volatile and flexible. And so are interpretive communities. Fish stresses their historicality but at the same time he acknowledges that, like any cultural assumptions we bring to bear on our interpretations, they *appear* to be incontestable and foundational. Again, this is tied up with his anti-essentialist position on meaning: "Meanings that seem perspicuous and literal are rendered so by forceful interpretive acts and not by the properties of language."[42] In other words, as long as we recognise the authority of a particular interpretive community — that is, as long as we believe in the foundational status of its interpretive strategies — we shall not be tempted to change our loyalties. Once we start entertaining doubts about its natural and universal sway over us, we are more and more likely to come under the influence of another one. There is no point, however, at which we can be 'stateless': belonging to *some* interpretive community means having beliefs and opinions, and thus it is an ineluctable aspect of our situatedness. As Fish puts it, "being situated not only means that one cannot achieve a distance on one's beliefs, but that one's beliefs do not relax their hold because one <knows> that they are local and not universal. This in turn means that even someone … who is firmly convinced of the circumstantiality of his convictions will nevertheless experience those convictions as universally, not locally, true."[43] By the same token, the anti-foundationalist project itself has to rest on some implicit 'foundations' — assumptions and beliefs that anti-foundationalists unflinchingly hold on to.

According to Fish, those beliefs should be carefully distinguished from a theory.[44] One of the principal contentions of declared anti-foundationalists is that their creed "really isn't a theory at all; it is an argument against the possibility of theory."[45] But when Fish argues that theory cannot possibly succeed because it is merely an extension of and an elaboration on practice, he seems to be oblivious of the reciprocal nature of such relations. If indeed, by stressing the local, the historical, the contingent and the variable, anti-foundationalist thought offers us an account of how foundations emerge,[46] *it is an account which generates some imperatives for critical practice*. Of course, one of the most uncompromising imperatives is that practice should liberate itself from the yoke of theory. In the long run, then, anti-

[42] Stanley Fish, "Introduction: Going Down the Anti-Formalist Road," in: Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 9.

[43] Stanley Fish, "Critical Self-Consciousness, Or Can We Know What We're Doing?" in: Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 467.

[44] Fish, like Knapp and Michaels, construes Theory as a set of principles, rules or procedures attached to no particular activity but thought of as a constraint on all fields of activity. See Fish, "Introduction: Going Down the Anti-Formalist Road," 14.

[45] Stanley Fish, "Consequences," in: Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 322.

[46] See Fish, "Introduction: Going Down the Anti-Formalist Road," 26 and Stanley Fish, "Anti-Foundationalism, Theory Hope, and the Teaching of Composition," in: Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 345.

-foundationalism cannot help *functioning* very much like the theory which it seeks to discredit. Fish might insist that his is a theoretical argument only in the sense of being involved in dismantling theory as such but, as I have demonstrated in the case of Knapp and Michaels's essay, this argument is parasitical upon the discourse whose preservation is vital for the very *practice* of anti-foundationalism.

The question that pragmatists ask at this point is: 'Why does an anti--foundationalist like Fish make such claims about theory and practice?' What is Fish angling for when he encourages literary critics to abandon theory and devote themselves to 'pure' practice? An answer to this question is implied in his, as well as Knapp and Michaels's, critique of theory's metapractical pretensions. Fish wants us to see those pretensions in terms of a claim to institutional power: by elevating itself above practice, theory attempts to prescribe its procedures and mechanisms. In consequence, practitioners of literary criticism should take counsel from those who are possessed of some arcane knowledge about what interpretation is and how it is supposed to be carried out. As Fish puts it, "[i]nterpretation is not an abstract or contextless process, but one that elaborates itself in the service of a specific enterprise."[47] Therefore it is the degree of its influence on the shape of interpretive strategies that will determine the authority of the enterprise: "[…] interpetation is a form of authority, since it is an extension of the prestige and power of an institution; and authority is a form of interpretation, since it is in its operations an application or "reading" of the principles embodied in that same institution."[48] Thus theory's claim to a metapractical status must be seen in the light of its advocates' will to power.

By contrast, the New Pragmatists are not only out to destabilise theory's regime but they also try to efface their own subversive force. Stanley Fish repeatedly stresses that theoretical pronouncements can have no consequences for any field outside the enterprise itself. His 'no-consequences' argument is endorsed by Knapp and Michaels who seem to cast doubt even on the effectiveness of their own arguments against theory.[49] If theory relies on a rhetoric of methodological superiority in relation to practice, the New Pragmatism counters it with a rhetoric of self-effacement and renunciation of power.[50] But this rhetoric should not obscure the fact that *both* parties are engaged in the same power game. Fish may be dismissive of the scope and far-reaching effects of exercising metapractical power within the academy and yet his anti-foundationalist position is a powerful bid for institutional authority.[51] It is not by accident that he has not published a single volume of *practical* criticism

[47] Stanley Fish, "Fish v. Fiss," in: Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 135.

[48] Fish, "Fish v. Fiss," 135.

[49] See Knapp and Michaels, "Reply to Our Critics," 105.

[50] See William J. Thomas Mitchell, "Introduction: Pragmatic Theory," in: William J. Thomas Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 4.

[51] The irony of his position on the issue is that he has become one of the most influential and charismatic figures within, as well as outside, the American academy, with an exorbitant salary of 230,000 $ as the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in Chicago.

for several decades now[52]; instead, he has furthered his career and professional stature by excoriating theory and counselling *others* to focus on critical practice. As a result, his recriminations against theory might be construed as a way of generating unflagging interest in what is at issue in the debate between pragmatists and theorists while, in the final analysis, their controversy may be seen as nothing else but a professional mystification.

All this is reminiscent of Fish's own argument against anti-professionalism. Fish takes anti-professionalism to be an attempt to reach a metaprofessional perspective by identifying the limitations and dead-ends of self-centred professionalism. Anti--professionalism would thus offer a broader view of the profession and reinscribe it into a general picture of human activity and universal values. But on closer inspection the sharp distinction between the two perspectives collapses:

> As we have seen again and again, anti-professionalism is by and large a protest against those aspects of professionalism that constitute a threat to individual freedom, true merit, genuine authority. It is therefore the strongest representation within the professional community of the ideals which give that community its (ideological) form. Far from being a stance taken at the margins or the periphery …, anti-professionalism is the very center of the professional ethos, constituting by the very rigour of its opposition the true form of that which it opposes. Professionalism cannot do without anti-professionalism: it is the chief support and maintenance of the professional ideology; its presence is a continual assertion and sign of the purity of the profession's intentions.[53]

Fish concludes that anti-professionalism is professionalism itself in its purest form. Consequently, anti-professionalism cannot be a viable *alternative* to professionalism because it will never reach a vantage point from which to adopt a detached and metaprofessional stance on what it purports to defy. By analogy — though it is an analogy which Fish does not seem to find handy in his own argument — anti--theoretical pronouncements which contest theory will in the long run solidify the enterprise itself rather than undermine its ideological foundations.

In *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change*, his major defence of the profession of literary criticism, Fish waxes conservative and resorts to arguments which are very difficult to square with his anti-foundationalism. He registers a threat to the identity of literary criticism, and, accordingly, he tries to isolate what should be preserved and protected against external pressures. First of all, Fish inveighs against the latest vogues in literary studies — interdisciplinarity and the New Historicism — for their ambition to connect up with what is going on

[52] To do him justice, it must be ackowledged that in 2001 he finally published, with Harvard University Press, his monumental study of Milton entitled *How Milton Works*.

[53] Stanley Fish, "Anti-Professionalism," in: Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 244—245.

in the political arena.[54] It is his conviction that literary criticism cannot, and should not, try to effect radical political changes because it is "characterized by a limited set of concerns and if those concerns are replaced by some others and the questions internal to literary study — questions like 'What does this poem mean?' — are let go in favour of other, supposedly larger, questions, one would still be doing something, but it would not be literary criticism."[55] It is his conviction that interdisciplinary approaches as well as historicist ones are informed by a misguided urge to find a political justification for doing literary criticism. This justification, which is felt to be the profession's *raison d'être* these days, is supposed to give those perspectives a moral sanction to continue what they are doing.

By far the most controversial claim that Fish makes in *Professional Correctness* is that literary criticism does not need a moral sanction at all because "[l]iterary interpretation, like virtue, is its own reward."[56] This is how he explains the isolationist implications of his conception of the discipline: its only rationale lies in the pleasure and satisfaction it affords to its practitioners. Incredible as it sounds from a leading anti-foundationalist of the day, his advice to literary critics is that they confine themselves to interpreting the literary work itself (to 'getting it *right*') rather than use it as part of an extra-literary strategy. According to Fish, interpretive acts should have as their immediate aim "the telling of the truth about some text or group of texts."[57] It is a point that Fish makes repeatedly, and ocassionally it takes the form of a plainly anti-pragmatic desideratum: "[y]ou can choose to do interpretive work, to try and get at the truth about texts or events or cultures …, or you can choose to do political work; but you can't do interpretive work … with the intention of doing political work because once you decide to do political work — that is, have before you *from the start* a particular political purpose you are trying to effect — you will be responsive and responsible to criteria that do not respect or even recognize the criteria of the academy."[58] Thus the choice is basically between being true to your profession's imperatives by focusing on the exploration of what the text *really* means (of its truth) and using it (indeed, *abusing* it from the point of view of professional purity) for extra-literary purposes.

I see two practical problems with this idyllic picture of the discipline and its practitioners. First of all, when Fish insists on aiming our interpretations at the telling of the truth about a text, he seems to be regressing to an outmoded version of essentialism which takes the existence of each text's truth as independent of our interpretive acts and unaffected by the historical, cultural and political situatedness of the reader. On the contrary, it is *only* in the light of some extratextual

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[54] See Stanley Fish, *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999), 47—48 and 51—52.

[55] Fish, *Professional Correctness*, 42.

[56] Fish, *Professional Correctness*, 110.

[57] Fish, *Professional Correctness*, 94.

[58] Fish, *Professional Correctness*, 133.

concerns and convictions that we can interpret anything at all; pure interpretation for its own sake is a fiction made up by those who want to disguise their actual ideological agendas. Secondly, Fish's distinction between *professional* interpretation and the use one makes of a text for political purposes[59] runs against the grain of one of the tersest definitions of the pragmatist position on the issue offered by Richard Rorty who claims that "all anybody ever does with anything is use it."[60] Consequently, no interpretation is free of some extra-literary assumptions and pre-determined intentions as to its purpose and outcome. We never interpret just to interpret, out of pure respect for the object of our interpretation. Even if the sole purpose of our interpretation is the satisfaction that reading can afford us, it should not be mistaken for the disinterested uncovering of a text's essence or its immanent truth.

Finally, let us go back to the issue of justification which, rather than constitute a moral sanction to practise Literary Studies, should further pragmatist goals and projects. It is my conviction that, if doing literary criticism is to be a purposeful and meaningful activity, it must be tied up with the didactic responsibilities of the academy. The idea of the 'ivory tower' — synonymous with such 'academic virtues' as disinterestedness and impracticality — will never chime in with the pragmatist stance on the value of knowledge. John Dewey, a paradigmatic pragmatist in this respect, describes his theory of the method of knowing in the following words: "Its essential feature is to maintain the continuity of knowing with an activity which purposely modifies the environment. … Only that which has been organized into our disposition so as to enable us to adapt the environment to our needs and to adapt our aims and desires to the situation in which we live is really knowledge."[61] The corollary of that is that Literary Studies should never be merely "an object of aesthetic contemplation,"[62] as Dewey has it. It is in the nature of the academic institution that literary scholars should use their knowledge and skills to affect their immediate environment (i.e. their colleagues and students) with the intention (even if unacknowledged) of exerting some influence on the external world. What this necessitates is a close relationship between research and teaching; we should revive the 19th-century model of education which saw literary scholarship not as an end in itself but as a *means* of acquiring knowledge to be subsequently transmitted to students.[63] At the same time let us bear in mind that such a transmission, despite its limited and unostentatious *modus operandi*, is in fact a political process which

[59] A similar distinction is made by Umberto Eco in his essay "Overinterpreting Texts," in: Stefan Collini, ed., *Interpretation and Overintepretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 45—66.

[60] Richard Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," in: Stefan Collini, ed., *Interpretation and Overintepretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 93.

[61] Dewey, "Theories of Knowledge," 216—217.

[62] Dewey, "Theories of Knowledge," 214.

[63] See Bruce E. Fleming, "What Is the Value of Literary Studies?" *New Literary History* 31 (2000), 469.

has some far-reaching effect on the views and personalities of those who lend us their ears.

The notion of knowledge, though central to both sides of the academic coin (i.e. scholarship and teaching), does not necessarily have to be taken too seriously. Once again, if we see knowledge as an instrument — and that is how the New Pragmatists want to see Literary Studies — what matters is that it should serve our purposes. Our interpretations and the ways we talk about them, rather than aspire to scientific objectivity at all costs, should be persuasive and interesting. It is the degree of their influence on how our readers/listeners will see the texts that we want to bring to their attention that constitutes the ultimate test of our scholarly expertise. Of course, we may keep on pretending that there is some intrinsic value and meaning to our readings, that our canons are more than arbitrary, and that, at the end of the day, the most conscientious scholars will be able to spot the light of some profound truth about literature and the world at large. But there is no point in justifying that by some transcendental injunction enjoined upon each interpreter by the conditions of the possibility of all texts or by our mission and professional responsibilities that we bear to society. No matter whether we admit that to ourselves or try to come up with some high-faluting rationale for engaging in Literary Studies, we will do so in order to proselytise new converts to our point of view and thus make our own camp stronger and more influential (read: solidify our own professional position). The New Pragmatist paradigm, in turn, may prove to be a sober corrective to the hypocrisy of all those who persistently deny that that is the ultimate reason for their (either theoretical or practical) interpretive activity.

Source

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